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Alter-modern, Claiming a New Era

PREFIGES ARE THE PREFERRED WAY TO END AN ERA, ALTER OR POST?

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Following the dubious claims that postmodernism is over, examined in [‘The Eclipse of Postmodernism?’](#) we will look at some of the main contenders laying claim to a new epoch and examples of the art that represents them.

Globalisation for example can be seen as a paradoxical continuation of fragmentation and standardisation (nationalism to undermine relations with foreign states, classicism to undermine cohesion at home) These factors do not seem to spoil the globalisation game which simply moves workforces and assets around the world in favour of the extremely rich. If anything globalisation is making the world into the dystopia described in so many postmodern science fiction films which may represent the true era of the ‘post modern’ where the last vestiges of modernism and romanticism are totally dissolved.

To be truly considered a new era the values and traits of the following concepts would have to filter out across the arts and cultures of the western world defining styles of; art, architecture, literature, politics and effecting morality and even laws.

Alter Modernity

Manifesto available [here](#).



Nicolas Bourriaud at a conference in 2014

“Artists are looking for a new modernity that would be based on translation: What matters today is to translate the cultural values of cultural groups and to connect them to the world network. This “reloading process” of modernism according to the twenty-first-century issues could be called altermodernism, a movement connected to the creolisation of cultures and the fight for autonomy, but also the possibility of producing singularities in a more and more standardized world,” Nicolas Bourriaud, keynote speech to the 2005 Art Association of Australia& New Zealand Conference

‘Creolisation’ here means, pronunciation, translations and examples, what Bourriaud proposes is that artists act as a kind of antidote to the homogenisation of globalisation a ‘rites of survival’ for certain perspectives healing or replacing where there has been erosion and promoting marginalised voices.

Modernism made appropriations in the pursuit of the universal subject this kind of appropriation is exemplified by Picasso’s use of African masks; while Picasso made incredible headway increasing the range of abstraction and adding to the canon of western culture, there was no particular interest in the context religious or social of the artefacts he looked at;



Detail of ‘Demoiselles d’Avignon 1907

as Robert Hughes observed Picasso was happy to see the masks as the transfer of violence into cultural objects. These appropriations where done in the name of looking for eternal or absolute truths if you don’t really believe in these then its simply a cultural appropriation.



The Zimba mask becomes a footnote in the western canon, is that ok?

This is obviously not what Bourriaud has in mind,

“Pascale Marthine Tayou employs colonised forms of African art to suggest the parameters of a truly globalised culture. The tendency of these works is to emphasise the fact that, in this era of the altermodern, displacement has become a method of depiction, and that artistic styles and formats must henceforth be regarded from the viewpoint of diaspora, migration and exodus,” Nicolas Bourriaud 2009



Kids Mascarade, photographs Pascale Marthine Tayou, 2009



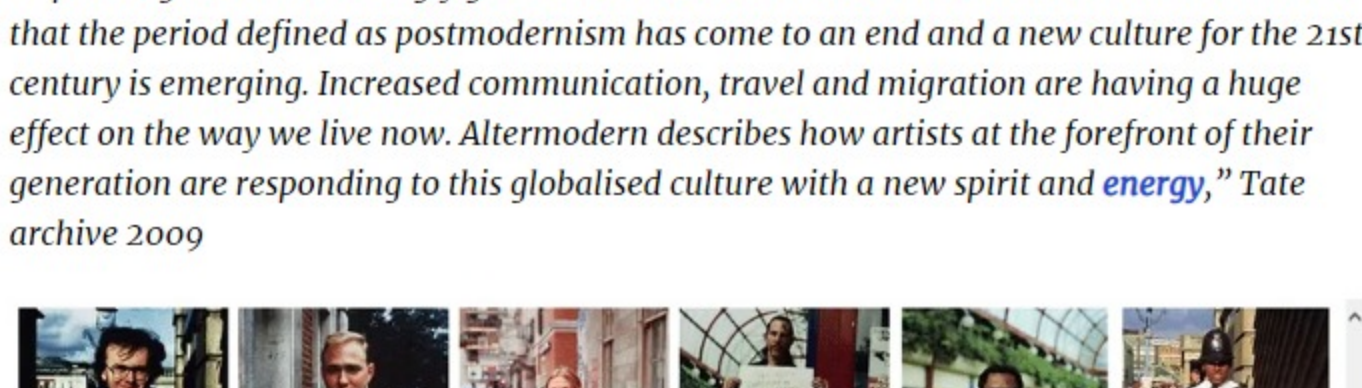
Kids Mascarade photographs Pascale Marthine Tayou, 2009 2

Pascale Marthine Tayou’s images are a strange visual kick they confront us with what must be very normal if you are from a postcolonial society that being aspects of your culture turning up in odd places. The children posing with the western masks is not an exact parallel to Picasso’s gesture but it is effective. It takes a tiny component of our culture, the cartoon mask and forces us to think about what exactly is being translated in those artefacts, there is something strangely violent about them they are superficial, commercial and seem alien on the local people.

Bourriaud stands for the flip side of globalisation where the increased opportunities for travel and instant communication may create openings for neglected or ignored cultures; when Bourriaud talks about ‘autonomy’ and ‘singularities’ he seems to be asserting a form of identity politics which would be seen through the old modernist lens as fragmentary and counter productive to the forging of the universal subject, postmodernism however which is where we are and what Bourriaud needs to undermine is totally at home with hybridism and identity politics so long as there is a liberal elite to manage the situation.

Altermodern is often associated with ‘relational aesthetics’ and was coined by Nicolas Bourriaud a French curator and critic. It came to prominence in the later 1990s and early 2000s. In short this kind of work further expands the range of art previously expanded to include performance and installation to also include semi-sociological experiments, community gatherings and rituals, incongruent happenings drawing on some specific identity and generally involves some interaction with the audience.

“Bourriaud is proposing the new art term ‘Altermodern’ to describe how artists are responding to the increasingly global context in which we all now live. Altermodern claims that the period defined as postmodernism has come to an end and a new culture for the 21st century is emerging. Increased communication, travel and migration are having a huge effect on the way we live now. Altermodern describes how artists at the forefront of their generation are responding to this globalised culture with a new spirit and energy,” Tate archive 2009



‘Signs that say what you want them to say not what someone else wants you to say’ Gillian Wearing 1993-1997

Bourriaud cited examples of the art which he saw as being ‘relational aesthetics’ artists include: [Gillian Wearing](#), [Philippe Parreno](#), [Douglas Gordon](#) and [Liam Gillick](#). Considering Wearing her work: ‘Signs’ is a good example of what Bourriaud had in mind; the work entailed Wearing approaching strangers at random asking them to simply write anything they like onto a piece of paper which would then be held up for a picture to be taken. Wearing was interested in how this minimal participation gave some control to the subject while also highlighting how controlled or restrained people are under normal conditions where their image is recorded such as snapshot photography or documentary film making.

The aesthetic of ‘relational aesthetics’ often includes this record of an event or intervention played back or displayed with photographs. It does seem that Bourriaud really does grasp the zeitgeist of the 90s and 2000s giving a suitable term to artworks that explore the opportunities he mentions above.

“Altermodern is against cultural standardisation and massification, but also opposed to nationalisms and cultural relativism. Altermodern artists position themselves within the world’s cultural gaps. Cultural translation, mental nomadism and format crossing are the main principles of altermodern art,” Tate archive 2009

Bourriaud aligns himself very clearly against the forces which have gathered immense strength over the decade since he championed Alter modernism and relational aesthetics; if alter modernism will replace postmodernism is in the balance but we can say that in 2009 he was right to identify threats which sadly have grown in their potential to wreak havoc.

Next we will look over Neo Modernity and Meta Modernity

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Michael Eden is the Arts Editor for Trebuchet Magazine, an artist and researcher working in London and the south east, his artistic practice is concentrated on painting and he divides his time between this and lecturing in art history and contextual studies.

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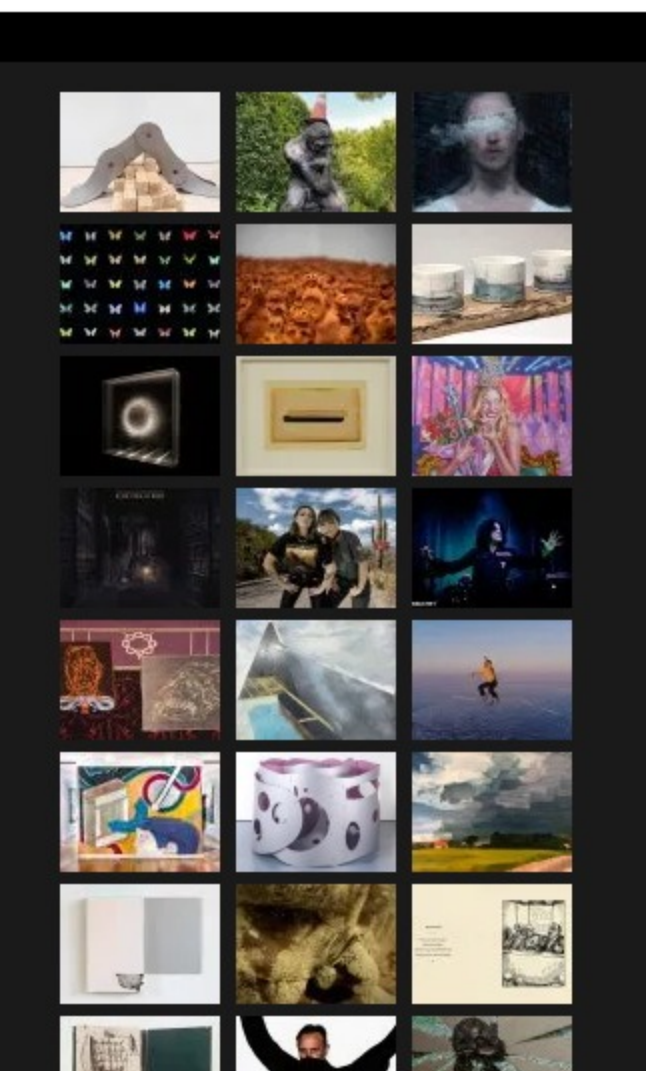
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